DISCUSSION GUIDE

Table of Contents

Letter From Michelle John, Former Superintendent of Paradise Unified School District 3

Status of Wildfires in 2020 4

How Do Wildfires Start & Why Are Wildfires Getting Worse 5

First Evacuation Tips 6

Discussion Questions 7

Activity 8

Letter From Michelle John

Dear Educators,

My name is Michelle John, and at the time of Camp Fire in Paradise, California, I was the superintendent of Paradise Unified School District. I also spent five years as Principal of Paradise High School. Thank you so much for taking the time to share this remarkable film with your students.

This is the first time I was part of a documentary, and it was a truly amazing experience. I didn't feel like I was ever "sharing my story," but rather just living it as it was being captured on camera. I first realized the potential impact of the film when it premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, UT. When taking questions after the screening, I saw so many people who cried throughout the film ask such moving questions about our community. We were thrilled to share stories of the generous and giving people that gave time, talent, and treasure to help us begin to rebuild. Audiences were especially inspired by the young people in the film, and I believe your students will be as well.

I hope this story shows young people that the end of the tunnel is never closed. Even today, when it seems like there is so much tragedy continuing, they should never give up. Kids are more resilient than we often give them credit for. Our kids came back, and they didn't give up hope. As you will see at the end of the film, young people understand how important it is to give back and pay it forward. When we show young people respect and we acknowledge how resilient they are, they give it back to us 10 fold.

Young people are likely hearing about and possibly being affected by the wildfires ravaging the west coast of this country. Wildfires are happening at such intensity because it is a perfect storm of climate change and forest management. Wildfires are not going to end, and we need to teach young people why wildfires are happening and how they can help reduce the risks associated with these devastating fires. I hope our story and this portrait of our resilient and giving community inspires your students and reminds them that together, we can get through things that otherwise seem impossible.

Sincerely,
Michelle John

How Wildfires Start & Why They're Getting Worse

Most wildfires in the United States occur on the West Coast. Wildfire season occurs during the summer months, with fires typically occurring between June and October. Over the past few years, wildfires have grown in size, duration, and severity, but why?

Many factors contribute to the growing amounts of wildfires. One of the most significant reasons wildfires are becoming more common is climate change. Some factors of climate change that contribute to wildfires include:

- **Overall rising temperatures**
- **Changes in weather patterns, such as increased winds and lightning**
- **Ongoing droughts**

Higher temperatures mean less rain, making forests and shrubbery drier and more flammable. This combined with drier seasons make fires more likely, allowing them to start more easily and spread more quickly. The speed and intensity of growing wildfires makes them difficult to contain or stop, which has devastating impacts on the environment, ecosystems, and people around them.

Combined with a hot, dry climate, fires are starting because of seemingly minor actions, like tossing cigarettes and campfire debris, downed power lines, fireworks, and other causes.

There are many ways we can work to combat climate change and prevent wildfires. One of the most important ways is to become informed. By understanding the causes and effects of wildfires, you are able to spread awareness and implement changes that can decrease them. To read more about why wildfires are growing, how to prevent them, and how to be prepared, check out these resources:

National Geographic **VOX.com** **SmokeyBear.com.** **Ready.gov**

Status of Wildfires in 2020

The West Coast has been hit exceptionally hard by wildfires in 2020, with California, Oregon, and Washington experiencing the most impact. Over 3.4 million acres have burned in the western part of the United States, with tens of thousands of acres burning in California, Oregon, and Washington over a 24 hour period. (BBC) The conditions of the wildfires are ever-changing.

Here are some current statistics on wildfires in 2020:

- As of September 10, 2020, 96 large wildfires are currently occurring in the Western US. (BBC, September 2020)
- California has experienced 3 out of 5 of its biggest wildfires in 2020 (BBC, September 2020), and almost half of the US's current wildfires are happening in the state (USA Today, September 2020).
- On September 8, 2020, twice as many acres of land in Washington were burned in wildfires than in 2019 alone (BBC, September 2020).

The wildfires are significantly impacting the ecosystems, environment, and communities around them:

- As of September 2020, 3,154,107 acres of land has burned, 6,391 structures have been destroyed, and there have been 20 fatalities in California during the 2020 wildfire season.
- As of September 2020, more than one million acres in Oregon were on fire and 500,000 people have been evacuated in
- Entire communities and neighborhoods, such as Talent OR, home to 6,500 people, have been destroyed (Center for Disaster Philanthropy, 2020).

The following resources can be used to track and monitor the status of wildfires:

- Active Fire Mapping Program - USDA Fire Service
- California, Oregon, and Washington Fire Tracking Maps - NY Times
- Monthly Wildfires Tracker - National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Discussion Questions

1. The opening scene of the film shows the intense and haunting experience residents of Paradise experienced as they were evacuating. How did this scene shape your perspective throughout the film?
2. Which of the subjects did you connect with? Why?
3. Have you ever had to be evacuated from your home? Do you want to share what that was like?
4. Wildfires are occurring more frequently than ever, with devastating impacts. What are some questions that you have about wildfires?
5. What stories in the film would you like to hear more about? Who would you choose to follow up with today?
6. What are some challenges you witnessed the residents of Paradise experience as they rebuilt? What are some that you think they are still dealing with today?
7. What words of advice and/or encouragement do you think the those affected by Paradise are giving today's victims of wildfires?
8. In the beginning of the film, two teens talk about their experience evacuating and trying to save special belongings, like their parents' wedding albums and baby photos. How do you think they felt in this situation? If you had to save a special belonging, what would it be? What is its significance?
9. The film talks about ways that human actions have started or made wildfires worse. What are some ways that you can help decrease or eliminate wildfires?
10. What are some ways that the residents of Paradise demonstrated both hope and frustration throughout the film? What lessons can we learn from them?
11. How did your understanding of wildfires and their impacts change from watching the film?
12. What are some ideas or moments that stuck with you after the film? How have they impacted you?

Activity

Rebuilding Paradise is an inspiring story that shows us how much can be rebuilt, both physically and emotionally, after such a catastrophic event. The students of Paradise experienced devastating fires, and they turned around and helped others affected by natural disasters. What can you learn from them?

Brainstorm some ways that you can help raise awareness and support for today's wildfire victims and others impacted by natural disasters. Some ideas include:

- Raising funds for victims
- Donating supplies, such as first aid kits, pet food, and toiletries
- Writing to your representatives to support legislation to slow and stop climate change

We challenge you to be creative and put your ideas in motion! No action is too small.

Here is a list of organizations from the film's websiteworking to provide direct assistance to residents of Paradise and help recovery efforts after natural disasters.